1 ‘Mami, you’re so hot!’ Negotiating hierarchies of masculinity through piropos in contemporary Havana

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The article analyses the practice of piropos – catcalling, compliments, comments – in Havana street interaction. While piropos are often approached as a form of heterosexual erotic interplay, this article argues for an understanding of this practice as a way to negotiate hierarchies of masculinity. The argument is developed through a comprehensive analysis of the emic distinction of piropos into two categories, piropos bonitos and groseros, that is, beautiful compliments on the one hand, and on the other, rude or offensive comments. Taken together, these different kinds of comments shed light on the role of piropos as part of male homosocial communication to perform masculinity in relation to other men. Furthermore, the article follows up on the distinction of piropos into two categories to explore the classed and racialized connotations of grosería or rudeness in street interaction.

Keywords: Havana, Cuba, street interaction, piropos, piropas groseras, piropos bonitos, homosociality, masculinity, Cuban feminist critique, ‘cultural level’
This article analyses the practice of *piropos* – catcalling, compliments, comments – in Havana street interaction. While *piropos* are often approached as a form of heterosexual erotic interplay, this article argues for an understanding of this practice as a way to negotiate hierarchies of masculinity. The argument is developed through a comprehensive analysis of the emic distinction of *piropos* into two categories, *piropos bonitos* and *groseros*, that is, beautiful compliments on the one hand, and on the other, rude or offensive comments. Taken together, these different kinds of comments shed light on the role of *piropos* – even though mostly directed to women – as part of a male homosocial communication to measure strength and perform masculinity in relation to other men present. Furthermore, the article follows up on the distinction of *piropos* into two categories, *bonitos* and *groseros*, to explore the classed and racialized connotations of *grosería* or rudeness in street interaction. This argument is then used to locate the role of *piropos* in the current social and historical context as central ingredients to mark unity in national terms, while at the same time establishing hierarchies and differentiations within this framework.

The material for this article was collected during 11 months of fieldwork in Havana during the period 2005-2010 (see Lundgren, 2011), through individual and group interviews, participant observation and a questionnaire on *piropos* (see end note i). The questionnaire proved to be pivotal to the research process. When the rumour spread that I was conducting research on *piropos* this provoked an interest that far exceeded any earlier reactions to my research on gendered and sexual ideals in contemporary Havana. (For a discussion of the ethics and reflexive challenges of the methodology of this study, see Lundgren, 2011: 42ff.).

**Piropos**

The term ‘*piropo*’ is sometimes translated as ‘compliment’ or ‘flattery’. As I will show throughout the article, ‘*piropo*’ is a broad and negotiable term with clearly situational and contextual interpretations, but it generally refers to verbal comments by men to women in street interaction. In contemporary Havana, ‘*piropo*’ occasionally also refers to sounds, gestures (such as kneeling down to give a woman a flower) or jokes to catch a woman’s attention in the street.

*Piropos* are interesting since, in Cuba, they are commonly understood and talked about as part of ‘Cuban idiosyncrasy’. Journalist Dalia Acosta writes that *piropos* are ‘ingrained in Cuban popular culture’ (Acosta, 2005), and historian Abel Sierra Madero suggests that *piropos* ‘are part of our everyday life and idiosyncrasy’ (Sierra Madero, 2006: 159, my translation). Using the term ‘idiosyncrasy’, *piropos* are portrayed as a national particularity. The term creates
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an image of a game with familiar rules that ‘we all know’. ‘Cuban idiosyncrasy’ also has strong positive connotations of national unity and pride. In this context, presenting a good piropo becomes a sign of belonging. Beverley Skeggs argues that national belonging creates a particular form of legitimacy – ‘to belong is to be legitimate’ (Skeggs, 2004: 19).

A recurring comment among some of my female interlocutors was that a day without a piropo was a wasted day. Nelia, a middle-aged single woman living in Vedado, said:

I tell you that if I go out and that day, during the whole day, no one says anything to me, I feel very sad. Because then I think that they don’t find me attractive, that I didn’t have positive energy. You’re used to them saying things to you. Even if they don’t say ‘How beautiful you look’.

Even if it’s your friends, and they say ‘How fine you look’, then you feel that you’re looking good, that they liked how you look, from the most sound and friendly point of view.

As mentioned above, piropos were distinguished between two categories, piropos bonitos and groseros, beautiful ones and rude or offensive comments. I took this distinction as the point of departure of the questionnaire on piropos that I conducted during my fieldwork in 2006 (see Lundgren, 2011: 97, 176ff) that inquired about the respondents’ experiences of piropos.1 When asked about the most beautiful piropo they had received, female respondents gave examples of comments that they had received by unknown men in the street, such as ‘How beautiful you look today’ or ‘You look radiant today’. They also gave examples of piropos that were more complex or witty, such as ‘What a beautiful flower, which garden did you escape from?’ or ‘If she cooks like she walks, I’ll eat even the scrapings’.

The examples of piropos above examples illustrate that some men made great efforts to come up with beautiful, witty, or clever piropos and to present them in graceful ways. I argue that such elaborated piropos effectively work to express a specific form of masculinity that consists of being funny, innovative, and smart, in Cuban chévere (see Tanuma, 2007: 54). When asking those of my female interlocutors who identified as heterosexual what characteristics their ideal man would have, they gave examples such as cheerful [alegre], funny [divertido], charismatic, and extroverted – all characteristics that are synonymous with the Cuban term chèvere. Elaborated piropos worked well to display such characteristics of quick-wittedness, humour, and grace, and street interaction thus became an important arena to perform such an ideal masculinity.
Homosociality and hierarchies of masculinity

Of course, not everyone was successful in the effort to present witty piropos gracefully. In an interview with Sandro, a man in his late twenties, we came to discuss piropos. I asked him if he usually gave women piropos. Sandro replied:

Yes, I have given piropos, but... I am not among the most intelligent, to be honest [laughs]. I have noticed that it doesn’t work for me [laughs].

Silje: How, because of how the woman has reacted, or…?

Sandro: Because, no, because I feel ridiculous. Well, you need some talent to pull that off [hay que tener alguna gracia para eso]. At first I tried to do it, because, I don’t know, I didn’t have a girlfriend [laughs]. So, I was like, trying to find someone to be with, to talk to, and to somehow find a girlfriend. I don’t know, those were the well-trodden paths that you had to walk, so I walked them, but they didn’t work, they were not made for me. To give piropos was not among my gifts. So, I tried to find other ways [laughs] to find girlfriends because I was not very good at it. I’m not very good at it.

Sandro presented his lack of skills in pulling off a good piropo as an individual shortcoming, and expressed great admiration for those men daring, successful, audacious, conquering, and adventurous enough to be ‘the good one’ and become the ‘leader’ of the group. Later in our interview, Sandro explained:

Men dare more when they’re in a group to demonstrate, perhaps unconsciously, to demonstrate to the other pal that he’s daring, that he’s successful, saying piropos, that he’s a person who’s audacious, as you say here, he’s daring, that’s the word that is used. That he’s daring, he’s adventurous, I don’t know, conquering. And actually, when he’s by himself, he’s the same person, and he says nothing.

And in a group, it’s like he feels more courageous. He’s backed by the group, and the group sometimes encourages him to say a piropo: ‘All right [A ver], say something to that woman!’ Or you’re walking, and you look at a girl, and they say, ‘But come on, say something, say something!’ whatever.
So, the good one is the one who really dares \[sí se lanza\], who dares, that’s the leader of the group, the one that everyone wants to be like, so it’s like this kind of group consequence…

Sandro emphasized the hierarchy that was created between men, where the highest rank went to the more courageous, the one who really dared. This description of encouragement or insistence among a group of men to give *piropos* to women clearly points to the importance of male homosociality in the performance of masculinity, both in terms of being backed up by the other men present and through the hierarchical status ascribed to he who excelled in this game.

The framework of male ‘homosociality’ has been an attempt to conceptualize how men encourage, promote, uphold, and foster their relationships with other men over their relationship to women (Hirdman, 2001: 19f., see also Lipman-Blumen, 1976; Sedgwick, 1985). In her classical analysis of homosociality, queer theorist Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) developed an understanding of homosociality as a form of male bonding with a triangular structure; a triangle in which men have intense bonds with other men, and women are given the role of conduits or channels of communication for men to express those homosocial bonds (ibid.).

Male homosociality has also been explored within the field of masculinity studies in Cuba, of which historian Julio César González Pagés was one of the initiators, and historian Abel Sierra Madero has continued as a ground-breaking pioneer. González Pagés suggests that relationships between men in Cuba are characterized by rivalry, and that men must not show signs of weakness or vulnerability (González Pagés, 2005: 7). He argues that the construction of masculinity in Cuba includes ingredients such as the demand to constantly demonstrate virility and bravery in front of other men (González Pagés, 2002: 119). Sierra Madero traces the long history of such traits of masculinity, showing that an idealized masculine being, audacious and with warrior virtues, has been crafted since the wars of independence and consolidated throughout the revolutionary process as a form of ‘autochthonous’ Cuban masculinity (Sierra Madero, 2006).

Reading Sandro’s account above against this background, his open admiration for those men who mastered the art of giving *piropos* – and his lament of his own shortcomings – clearly reflect González Pagés’s point about the role of homosociality in the construction of masculinity, through demonstrating virility in front of other men, and Sierra Madero’s connection
of a specific form of masculinity to national belonging. Sandro’s account also points to the hierarchical nature of this ideal masculinity, in that *piropos* worked to establish a hierarchy among the group of men, and a hegemonic position was ascribed to the most daring and brave man in the group.

**Negotiating positions among men**

Pointing to the importance of male homosociality in the negotiation of hierarchical masculinity gives tools to understand the other side of the spectrum of *piropos*, namely *piropos groseros*, rude or offensive comments. The questionnaire on *piropos* that I carried out in 2006 also inquired about the most rude – *groseros* – *piropo* the respondent had received or heard lately. Some of the female interlocutors gave examples of comments that they had received from unknown men in the street, such as ‘*Mamita*, let me touch your buttocks’ or ‘If I catch you I will suck all that’. Male interlocutors gave examples of *piropos* they had overheard being given to women in street interaction, such as ‘*Mami*, what a great shit thrower [*bota caca*] you have!’ or ‘*Mami*, if I catch you I’ll give you cock until milk [word also used for sperm] comes out of your ears’.

I discussed *piropos groseros* with Ramón, a man around thirty whom I interviewed in 2006. He reflected:

> I think that often, it’s like a performance. It’s a thing that they do, independent of what the woman thinks or how she will react. That is, it doesn’t matter, it’s more like, among friends and, so that the friends will laugh at what they’re saying, and see – right? – ‘Wow, he is witty’ and things like that. […]

But I’m telling you, often it doesn’t really matter what woman it is, and that stuff, you see? Instead, the important thing is the act of doing it, and making a good impression, or …

Also, if you manage to provoke a burst of laughter at the expense of someone feeling bad, it doesn’t matter, you still achieved it [*Incluso, si logras arrancar carcajadas a costa de que alguien se sienta mal, no importa, lo lograste igual*].

Ramón suggested downplaying the importance of the receiving woman’s reaction to a *piropo* and instead highlighting how the man would appear witty and daring in relation to the other men present. This again points to the importance of homosociality, the presence of other men, to demonstrate central characteristics of masculinity. It also illustrates that men did not necessarily lose
status in a homosocial hierarchy through a piropo grosero. Women’s bothered reactions seemed to be of less importance than appearing funny and daring in front the group of men. Thus, giving women rude or offensive comments might be understood as a way of communicating and negotiating hierarchical positions among men, rather than as a form of mutual heterosexual interplay.

This negotiation of positions among men could also take the form of rivalry. This was not only communicated through explicit comments but also gazes or body language. In 2005 I interviewed Elisabet, a woman in her mid-twenties, and she retold some occasions in street interaction that had upset her. I asked whether her boyfriend Abel had ever been present on any of those occasions, and Elisabet told me about one such event:

I remember once, we were crossing [a large traffic junction in Havana] and this man came, and he kept staring at me, right? A guy of thirtysomething, something like that.

And Abel did something like this, he turned around like this, and he did this gesture with his hand, like saying, ‘What’s up?’ – right? – ‘What’s up with you?’ And this guy… Abel looked back, and he said, ‘This guy is going to fight me, we’ll see what happens.’

And the guy told him, ‘Shit, man, don’t take it that way. The thing is that I was looking at what’s beside you, because she’s a very beautiful girl,’ like that, right?

So the guy tackled it really well, right? It was like, I don’t know, like he shouldn’t think he was being rude, you see? Instead, like, that I was a beautiful person, that he was simply appreciating that – right? – but that he wasn’t checking me out or anything like that. At least that was what he said, it might have been just the opposite. So Abel was like, ‘OK, that’s fine, it’s OK, whatever.’

Elisabet’s account reflects a very fine line in a double-sided communication in which women’s bodies become instruments to communicate and measure strength between men. The story illustrates that on the one hand, for a man to check out a woman who is accompanied by another man is considered a challenge to the accompanying man’s position and is thought to offend and humiliate him. Hence, a man accompanying a woman may look other men warningly in the eyes to show that he is alert and ready to meet any insult or comment. But on the other hand, to check her out might also be taken as
a compliment to the accompanying man’s conquest and enviable catch, and thus give him a certain status position in a male hierarchy. Moreover, these two are connected; because a beautiful woman beside him will give him a status position, other men’s comments or stares will be taken as insults or threats against him. In the situation above, this fine line was drawn through subtle moves. Abel interpreted the stare at Elisabet within the first interpretation above, as a challenge; but the other man managed to switch the interpretation into the second, as a complimenting admiration of his enviable catch. The situation hence turned from a potential fight to a sceptical truce.

**Male sexual ‘drives’**

Another common emic understanding of *piropo* was as an expression of men’s uncontrollable sexual ‘drives’. Among my interlocutors, men who expressed desire and admiration for women’s beauty through comments or stares in street interaction were often considered to be following an inherent nature. Ramón, whom I introduced above, explained this to me in our interview: ‘It’s also like a sign of virility, that with such a beautiful woman I can’t hold back, I have to show her that “Oh, I’m dying to get her”.’ These ‘drives’ could be communicated through *piropo*, but also through non-verbal performances. On occasions, at seeing a particularly beautiful woman, a man could perform a scene in the street as if hypnotized or struck by lightning; he would moan loudly, hit the wall in despair, and at times even rip his clothes while groaning as if in pain, following the woman with his eyes. In my reading of the situation, this performance played with the conception of ‘drives’, in that it expressed how the man was trying to handle the instinctive reactions aroused by the sight of this woman. He could supposedly not control himself, but must stare, moan, and scream out the pain provoked by the sheer sight of her. Such a performance was generally considered a great compliment to the woman in question, as she was perceived as having managed to arouse such a strong reaction in a man just by her looks or body language. The more explosive and ‘uncontrollable’ the performance, the greater the compliment.

I understand the framing of such expressions of male desire in terms of uncontrollable ‘drives’ as a process of naturalization that legitimizes and authorizes the logic of street interaction. Moreover, I read this logic as an appropriation of the arena of the street as a symbolically male space. Through these performances, men declared an ‘entitlement’ to this arena, moving in and using this space as if they ‘owned it’ (see Skeggs, 2004: 153). The performance and negotiation of masculinity in this arena could thus be said to take the form of an ‘authorized language’ that made it legitimate in itself (see Bourdieu, 1977:...)
The street thus became an arena of male symbolic power, on which the male gaze was inscribed with the power to scan, examine, evaluate, and desire (Bourdieu, 2001: 66). In the words of sociologist Beverley Skeggs, this ‘offers to masculinity the power to impose standards, make evaluations and confirm validity’ (Skeggs, 1997: 112).

However, the framing of such expressions of male desire in street interaction in terms of ‘drives’ did not completely naturalize these practices. On the contrary, the material of exemplifies a conscious verbalization of the rules of the game, of its objectives, strategies and negotiations. This was the case both with píropo and non-verbal performances of male desire. While these practices were based on the image of an uncontrollable sexual urge, they were nevertheless understood as carefully crafted and skilful performances.

**Challenging strategies**

Of course women by no means passively or silently accepted this symbolic appropriation of the arena of the street. Quite the opposite; my female interlocutors applied a range of active and innovative challenging strategies to contest this appropriation (see also Martínez Herrera, 2009). Sofia, a woman in her late twenties, told me about the ways she used to handle píropo groseros, rude or offensive comments from unknown men in the street. At times, she said, she would enter a state of yoga or meditation so that she would not even notice the comments shouted at her. Other times she would walk directly towards a man before he even had time to say anything to ask him the time. When I interviewed Sofia in 2005 she explained, ‘The guys, if you direct yourself to them, they immediately act cowardly, they go down. You see?’ On another occasion, Sofia told me that she dreamed of gathering a group of female friends who would place themselves along a block and pick a man at whom they would shout píropos similar to those received by women. Yet another idea that she was elaborating was to prepare small paper notes with messages or questions to men who gave her offensive comments, to make them question themselves and their practice in street interaction. Sofia hence responded firmly to such píropos, both in the moment and planning ahead, along a scale from defensive to pro-active and elaborate strategies.

Sofia’s strategies could be read as attempts to denaturalize the practice of píropos groseros. Her plan of written notes would make men reflect on what they were doing. Sofia also dreamed of turning the situation upside down with a collective revengeful response to bombard men with the same píropos that women received, to make them reflect on the order of things. I read these strategies as contesting and challenging men’s symbolic appropriation of the
arena of the street, and as efforts to actively re-conquer this arena. Thus, while framing *piropos* in terms of ‘Cuban idiosyncrasy’ and uncontrollable male ‘drives’ worked to naturalize and legitimize this practice, women’s active and daring challenging strategies managed to widen the space for possible critique. Hence, their strategies were not just reproductive contestations within a male symbolic appropriation of the street, but also set out to redesignate the premises of this appropriation and undermine it (see Skeggs, 1997: 129). In Bourdieuan terms, these challenging strategies took on the struggle about the terms in which street interaction was framed and contested the symbolic imposition of dominant definitions of this interaction (see Bourdieu, 2001: 13f.).

A similar contestation has been formulated by Cuban feminists such as psychologist Karelin López who has made a broad study of sexual harassment. López wishes to confront naturalizing understandings of *piropo* and bring the taken-for-granted familiarity of this practice to the fore to put its rules under scrutiny for public debate. López suggests seeing the practice of *piropo* as one end of a continuum of sexual harassment (see López, 2001; see also Acosta, 2005a; Martínez Herrera, 2009), a continuum that also includes *tiradores* (men who masturbate in public) and physical harassment at crowded buses. Furthermore, López suggests that legislation on harassment must be revised and that a new definition of sexual harassment must be developed (López, 2001). For instance, López argues that the naturalized conception of men’s uncontrollable ‘drives’ contributes to holding women responsible for harassment (ibid.).

Above, I argued that *piropos* worked as an appropriation of the arena of the street as a symbolically male space. This appropriation, together with the processes of naturalization and legitimation through framing them as expressions of male ‘drives’ and of Cuban ‘idiosyncrasy’, also created a frame for developing challenging strategies. Creating a space for conflict and resistance on this arena implied a challenge to the inclusion of *piropos* as an element of national particularity, specified through the use of the term ‘idiosyncrasy’. It also implied a challenge to naturalized gendered conceptions of sexuality, such as the ‘irrepressible sex drives’ of men. In this sense, my female interlocutors’ creative strategies against rude or offensive *piropos* indirectly also challenged underlying conceptions that held women responsible for harassment.

‘Cultural level’

To further contextualize the practice of *piropos* and in particular *piropos groseros*, rude or offensive comments, it is necessary to locate this phenomenon in its specific historical context of contemporary Havana. The last section of this article will explore how the talk of *piropos* was not only used to articulate unity
and pride, through inscribing this practice in the notion of ‘Cuban idiosyncrasy’. Piropos were also a central tool to mark difference and distinction. To explore this I again draw on the work of Beverley Skeggs who analyses processes of ‘making difference’ (Skeggs 1997; 2004), and sees these processes as ‘dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic’ (ibid.: 5).

At the outset of the article, I introduced Nelia, a middle-aged woman who expressed that she would feel sad if a whole day went by without her receiving any piropos. Later in our interview, we then about different kinds of piropos, and Nelia explained:

> When it comes to the street there are the flirts, and there are the liars, and there are normal people. It depends on the person. There are very fine piropos from nice persons; there are persons who are very moderate. There are people who are shameless, filthy and disgusting. There are all kinds.

That also depends on a person’s cultural level. If it’s a person who has read, who has studied, one who develops within a normal environment, family-oriented and such, he will say a nice piropo, that doesn’t hurt that person. If it’s a vulgar person, less educated, he will say something disgusting.

Nelia linked ‘normality’ to characteristics such as fine, nice, moderate, educated, and family-oriented, which was then contrasted with a number of disdainful characteristics that made use of poor educational preparation to explain ‘vulgar’ and ‘disgusting’ piropos. Nelia created a hierarchy between a ‘we’ represented by ‘normality’ and moderation, and the contrasting vulgar and shameless ‘others’. Through portraying the rude piropos as deviant expressions of poor education, Nelia could also celebrate the precious tradition of piropos, that without which her day would be a complete waste, as quoted above. In other words, the framing of piropos as part of Cuban ‘idiomsyncrasy’ referred specifically to the beautiful piropos. Nelia’s formulation of offensive piropos as ‘vulgar’ and inappropriate expressions of a ‘low cultural level’ displaces such rude comments piropos as ‘degenerate’ expressions of a positive national idiosyncrasy. Paradoxically, this exclusion of ‘inappropriate’ piropos also seems to consolidate the framing of beautiful and welcome piropos in terms of the celebrated unity of Cuban ‘idiomsyncrasy’.

Nelia explicitly used ‘cultural level’ as a marker of difference to make the distinction between different kinds of piropos. In the Cuban context, one can
talk about having ‘(high) culture’ or ‘low culture’, or a high or low ‘cultural level’. To understand the role of this particular marker of difference, I here draw on two anthropological accounts that discuss the classed and racialized aspects of the concept of ‘cultural level’ in the context of contemporary Havana. In the analysis of Mette Louise Berg/Rundle, to have cultural level in this context includes ‘moderation, decency, and restraint’ as well as an ‘emphasis on non-promiscuous behaviour, and preferences in style and taste of music, food, hair and clothing’ (Rundle, 2001: 8). The concept ‘cultural level’ is also clearly racialized, relating to a racialized ‘hierarchy of “good” and “bad” accents’, and Afrocuban religion and music are often seen as expressions of a low cultural level (ibid., 8). In a similar manner, Nadine Fernandez relates talk of ‘low cultural level’ to formal education, but also to values such as decency, propriety, etiquette, and moderation (Fernandez, 2010: 134). To locate this marker of difference, Fernandez sees ‘low culture’ as ‘a class discourse embedded with a racial one’ (ibid., 138). Similarly, Rundle argues that inscribing issues of race and inequality into a domain of ‘cultural level’ works to avert ‘any indications of marginality being a product of social structures and processes’ (Rundle, 2001: 1). Furthermore, she writes:

To have cultural level coincides with high culture and white elite values, but it is presented as a choice, open to all individuals, irrespective of social background. The discourse of cultural level has, in other words, become an idiom in which to articulate racialised and classed ideas of morality and behaviour, without acknowledging it as such. (Rundle, 2001: 8)

This is a necessary context to understand the situational character of categorizing a particular piropo as either beautiful or offensive, bonito or grosero. Very similar comments could thus be interpreted very differently depending on the context, tone, and who said it, and to whom. Moreover, the interpretation of certain comments as groseros, rude or offensive, must be understood in relation to the classed and racialized character of the concept of grosería. The terms used above to frame the examples of piropos as rude – groseros – such as ‘vulgar’ and ‘bad taste’, were typical of how my interlocutors framed ‘low culture’. The entanglement of grosería with the conception of ‘low cultural level’ was so tight that this became self-explanatory in a circular fashion. The full reply from one of the questionnaires on piropos might illustrate this. A female respondent commented on the question about the rudest piropo she had received and what her reaction had been in the following manner:
Mami, you’re so hot! A black man, rude, with a bad appearance in the street and with attitude [Un negro, grosero, de mal aspect en la calle y con guapería]. Sometimes this happens almost every day. Reaction: I don’t even look at him and keep walking. You have to ignore such things of bad taste.

It is important to note that the comment in itself – ‘Mami, you’re so hot!’ – would not in itself have been characterized as rude. On the contrary, several examples of beautiful piropos from the questionnaires were strikingly similar to this comment. Instead, the respondent drew on the classed and racialized connotations of grosería to depict a rude and inappropriate situation. Central here is the use of the term ‘guapería’. The term comes from the adjective and noun guapo. In Cuban Spanish, this does not mean handsome, as it does in peninsular Spanish. Instead, it refers to cocky, gutsy, rough behaviour. Nadine Fernandez discusses how guapos are pictured as aggressive, with bad and vulgar language, and that this guapería is used as a marker of ‘low cultural level’ (Fernandez, 2010: 95ff.). Thus, in this specific example, markers of ‘low cultural level’ such as ‘bad taste’ and guapería, together with an explicit racialization of the man giving the piropo, were used to contextualize the comment and situation as rude and offensive.

The understanding of piropos was thus marked by a tension between inclusion and exclusion, unity and hierarchy. Piropos were, on the one hand, framed as part of ‘Cuban idiosyncrasy’, and the capacity to present a good piropo became a sign of national belonging. However, this understanding was clearly delimited through a portrayal of rude and offensive piropos as ‘degenerate’ forms of this national particularity. Such rude comments were explained in terms of ‘low cultural level’ and grosería, making use of the classed and racialized connotations of these concepts. And the other way around: classed and racialized difference was demarcated through examples of ‘vulgar’ or ‘inappropriate’ comments. Marking difference through the exclusion of certain piropos was in fact conditioned by and thus confirmed the role of piropos as an element of a positive national particularity.

The choice of ‘cultural level’ as a marker of difference must furthermore be related to a specific historical location. Much literature within Cuban studies explores how economic inequalities have increased since the economic crisis of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Espina Prieto, 2004). The main ways to access hard currency have not been equally available, since remittances from relatives abroad follows the stratification of the exile community, and employment within the new tourist demonstrate clearly racialized
preferences (Fuente 2001, Eckstein 2004). In this context, anthropologist Noelle Monet Stout suggests that ‘during the island’s transition to late socialism the relationship between cultural and financial capital was often inverted’ (Stout, 2008: 734). Thus, people in contemporary Havana navigate in a context of new and unfamiliar differentiations. This serves as a framework to understand the increased importance of ‘cultural level’ as a marker of difference, in negotiating positions in a context where hierarchies are currently renegotiated in relation to new economic and material conditions.

Concluding remarks

The practice of píropo – approached as a continuum of catcalling, compliments and comments in street interaction – forms an important and omnipresent part of everyday life in Havana. It is therefore not surprising that this practice becomes a central ingredient to negotiate complex power relations inherent in everyday ideals around gender, sexuality and nationality. This article has pointed to two central processes of hierarchization and differentiation in which píropos play an important role. Giving píropos was a way to demonstrate a daring and brave masculinity and to gain a position within a male homosocial hierarchy. A comprehensive analysis of the connections between beautiful and rude comments sheds light on the role of píropos in male homosocial communication. Giving píropos appeared as a game among men, to measure strength and perform masculinity in relation to other men present.

Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the central role of píropos as a marker of national ‘idiosyncrasy’ to locate this practice in its current social and historical context. An analysis of the framing of píropos as inherent in Cuban ‘idiosyncrasy’ points to a tension between unity and hierarchy; to the strong connections with belonging and pride on the one hand, which condition the need to exclude undesired elements on the other hand. Paradoxically, the hierarchy that was created through the exclusion of rude píropos as a form of ‘degeneration’ seemed to consolidate the role of píropos as an element of a positive national particularity.

Notes

1 The questionnaire inquired about píropos that the respondent had received or overheard, and their reactions to these comments. It asked whether the respondent would give píropos in street interaction or other contexts.

The questionnaire also included questions about gendered ideals. I collected only a small sample of eleven men and eleven women of different ages who completed the questionnaire. Since the most interesting result of this experiment turned out to be the discussions it provoked around the phenomenon of píropos, I did not choose to amplify the sample through more questionnaires completed in my absence. The ages of respondents varied from twenty to fifty-something. After completing the questionnaire, the person was asked to put the form in an envelope which I provided, and seal it (see Lundgren, 2011: 97, 176ff).
References


